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UN Food Systems Summit 2021: Dismantling Democracy and Resetting Corporate Control of Food Systems

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This article analyzes the development and organization of the United Nations Food Systems Summit (UNFSS), which is being convened by UN Secretary General António Guterres in late 2021. Although few people will dispute that global food systems need transformation, it has become clear that the Summit is instead an effort by a powerful alliance of multinational corporations, philanthropies, and export-oriented countries to subvert multilateral institutions of food governance and capture the global narrative of “food systems transformation.” This article places the upcoming Summit in the context of previous world food summits and analyzes concerns that have been voiced by many within civil society. It elaborates how the current structure and forms of participant recruitment and public engagement lack basic transparency and accountability, fail to address significant conflicts of interest, and ignore human rights. As the COVID-19 pandemic illuminates the structural vulnerabilities of the neoliberal model of food systems and the consequences of climate change for food production, a high-level commitment to equitable and sustainable food systems is needed now more than ever. However, the authors suggest that the UNFSS instead seems to follow a trajectory in which efforts to govern global food systems in the public interest has been subverted to maintain colonial and corporate forms of control.

Keywords: United Nations food systems summit, food systems, global governance, right to food, multi-stakeholder partnerships, Committee on World Food Security, multilateralism, corporate control

INTRODUCTION

On World Food Day in 2019, UN Secretary-General António Guterres announced to the Plenary of the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS) that he was organizing a high-level UN Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) as part of the Decade of Action to deliver the Sustainable Development Goals. The announcement took many in the room by surprise. Although the CFS is the primary international and intergovernmental platform for food security and nutrition policy, the call for the Summit neither emerged from the CFS, nor even the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). It was unclear who would organize the Summit, where it would be held, or where the call for the Summit had originated. However, the Secretary-General did provide a few clues to identify the key partners of the Summit—the Rome-Based Agencies of the UN and the World Economic Forum (WEF). Just a few months earlier, Amina Mohammed (Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations and Chair of the United Nations Sustainable Development Group)

had signed a strategic partnership with the WEF. In its efforts to promote the interests of the world's largest corporations, the WEF has pursued a "Great Reset" intended to allay opposition to neoliberal globalization through a new vision of "stakeholder capitalism" and multistakeholder global governance (Schwab, 2021). In the ensuing months, once Guterres appointed a Special Envoy and the structure of the Summit was announced, the drivers behind the Summit became clear. As the world is increasingly cognizant of social and environmental problems caused by the industrial food system, the UNFSS has emerged as an elaborate process to undermine more democratic arenas of global food governance, while reinforcing corporate control over food systems.

Few people will dispute that global food systems need transformation. *The Lancet* Commission on the Double Burden of Malnutrition describes the current state of food and agricultural systems as a "triple crisis" in which obesity, undernutrition, and climate change are decimating human and planetary health (Swinburn et al., 2019). Despite global commitments to end hunger by 2030 in Sustainable Development Goal 2, the number of people who are food-insecure has risen since 2014. According to the most recent *State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World* report, 746 million people were suffering from severe food insecurity in 2019 and an additional 1.25 billion people experienced moderate food insecurity (FAO et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated hunger and is anticipated to add between 83 and 132 million more people to the number in chronic undernourishment¹. Malnutrition, including both micronutrient deficiencies or so-called "hidden hunger" as well as overweight and obesity now plague ~3.4 billion people worldwide (HLPE, 2020). As a result, the FAO now identifies non-communicable diseases from poor diets as the number one cause of premature death globally (FAO et al., 2020).

Dominant food and agricultural systems pose just as great a threat to the planet as they do to humans. The industrial food system is one of the largest contributors to climate change. The IPCC 2019 report on Climate Change and Land estimated that up to 37% of greenhouse gas emissions come from food systems in total. A recent article claimed that meeting the Paris Climate Agreement's goal of remaining between 1.5 and 2°C of warming will not be possible without reducing emissions from global food production and consumption (Clark et al., 2020). Global food and agricultural production are also the number one cause of deforestation, decreasing biodiversity, and loss of topsoil. Cataclysmic loss of biodiversity documented in the Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services will further affect human health through declines of critical ecosystem services ranging from pollination of crops to avoidance of pandemics arising from spillover of wildlife diseases into human populations.

The triple crisis we face today is not spontaneous but rather the consequence of a long struggle over the governance of global food systems. While colonialism laid the foundation for

globalization of food systems (Friedmann and McMichael, 1989) since formation of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), a shifting ensemble of individuals, states, and social movements have sought to build institutions with public regulatory capacity to promote global food security, self-sufficiency, and the human right to food. However, this vision of what we call "public global food governance"—that is, a system of multilateral coordination and regulation premised on democratic deliberation—has been routinely undermined by powerful actors that have instead promoted international finance institutions, global regulatory fragmentation, and public-private partnerships that push industrial agriculture, productivism and trade liberalization at the expense of global food security and the livelihoods of small-scale producers and rural workers. It is this set of industrialized agricultural practices—with their high levels of synthetic inputs and proprietary technologies—that have been most responsible for the triple crisis that we are now experiencing. Nevertheless, in a moment when the global pandemic is exacerbating food insecurity and malnutrition, and as global social movements demand public global food governance that promotes the public good over private profit, powerful states in partnership with those multinational corporations aligned with the WEF are seeking to thwart emerging institutions of democratic public global food governance. This is an undertaking that centers on the UN Food Systems Summit.

This article examines the development and organization of the UNFSS and elaborates concerns that many civil society organizations have raised about the UNFSS². We describe the context in which the Summit was announced, how it has been rolled out, which actors it has empowered, with what resources, and with what objectives. Although the Summit's promoters use the language of food systems, transformation, and inclusivity (even calling it a "People's Summit"), it has become clear that the Summit is instead an effort by a powerful alliance of multinational corporations, philanthropies, and export-oriented countries to subvert the growing power of the Committee on World Food Security—an arena that since the 2007–08 global food crisis has emerged as the primary institution of public global food governance—as well as to capture the narrative of "food systems transformation." We illustrate how promoters of the Summit have put forth a narrow concept of food systems that privileges global value chains over local control and human rights. Although multiple parallel food systems coexist at present (Anderson, 2015; Anderson and Rivera-Ferre, 2021), promoters

¹ Available online at: http://www.fao.org/3/ca9692en/online/ca9692en.html#chapter-executive_summary (accessed January 29, 2020).

² We use the term "civil society" throughout this article to refer to the agrarian producer and worker movements and progressive NGOs comprising the Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples Mechanism (CSM) in the CFS. The UNFSS Liaison Group of the CSM has elaborated a clear critique of the UNFSS through an open call to respond to the UNFSS, as well as a letter to the Chair of the CFS in February 2021. However, civil society is heterogeneous and many newer organizations with different agendas, such as the International Land Coalition and Scaling Up Nutrition Movement, are participating in the Food Systems Summit. See: <http://www.csm4cfs.org/14024/> (accessed March 5, 2020). La Vía Campesina, the International Peasant Movement, also published a separate critique of the UNFSS: https://viacampesina.org/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/12/LVC-Position_EN_UN-Food-Summit_2020_LowRes3.pdf (accessed March 5, 2020). We have drawn on these critiques in our analysis of the UNFSS.

have chosen to focus primarily on those “levers of change” from which multinational corporations can profit, rather than the indigenous and agroecological food systems that have never contributed to today’s environmental problems and even help to restore degraded ecosystems.

In analyzing the threat posed by the UNFSS to democratic, public global food governance, the article proceeds as follows. First, we place the upcoming Summit in the context of previous world food summits to show how it departs from precedents and reinforces a constant thread of suppression of civil society and non-exporting countries in the Global South. Next, we explain how the formation, current structure, forms of participant recruitment, and public engagement of the UNFSS lack basic transparency and accountability and fail to address human rights or significant conflicts of interest of the organizers. Finally, we conclude with specific challenges to the UNFSS and Member States of the UN, and our warning that failure to change current ways of operating risks a momentous failure to move toward equitable and sustainable food systems that provide food security and nutrition for all.

GLOBAL FOOD SUMMITS AND THE ARCHITECTURE OF GLOBAL FOOD GOVERNANCE

Since the formation of the United Nations, multilateral international institutions have served as the primary fora responding to successive global food crises. The UNFSS is unique insofar as it departs from the interactive multilateral vision and institutional arenas of global food governance that were established during previous world food summits, up to and including the 2008 Rome Conference. Governments at prior Rome summits wrestled with responding to periodic hunger or food price crises with proposals attuned to resolving uneven regional and national capacities to address food rights and security measures. Past initiatives constructed and reconstructed the multilateral architecture of food governance, often in favor of powerful agro-exporting states, through shifting emphases on aid, trade and/or investment interventions. By contrast, the UNFSS’s distinguishing feature is its venue in New York, with a WEF-designed multistakeholder framework. As we note below, this reflects the consolidation of a public-private partnership model, initiated in 2000 with the UN Global Compact encouraging corporations to adopt sustainable and social goals in their programming, as “public goods.” Increased partnering of “public” with “private” interests over time has shifted the balance of power to the private sector. The UNFSS exemplifies this shift. By privileging private initiative under WEF auspices, it is overturning the principle of multilateralism to enable corporate capture of food system governance. The WEF intervention, invited by the UN, resembles a “shock doctrine”³ response to deepening food and environmental insecurities, that

³This refers to free-market forces using their power in crisis periods to preempt progressive change: https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/5dmqyk/naomi-klein-interview-on-coronavirus-and-disaster-capitalism-shock-doctrine (accessed March 5, 2021).

have strengthened civil society resistances inside and outside the FAO. This section traces how this intervention and narrative have replaced the principle of UN multilateral governance, with the WEF claiming corporations as “trustees of society”⁴.

Early Global Food Governance Tensions: Establishing the FAO

The initial vision of global food governance was embodied in the formation of the FAO and its commitment to public leadership. In the mid-1940’s, facing serious food shortages following the collapse of international trade and world war, the FAO’s mandate was to stabilize and manage food security on a world scale, with food to be “treated as an essential of life rather than primarily as merchandise” (quoted in Phillips and Ilcan, 2003, p. 441). In this sense, the emerging post-colonial era embodied a public vision of global governance supporting the right to food, embodied in the UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). This was promoted by FAO Director-General B.R. Sen’s Freedom From Hunger Campaign in the World Food Congress of 1963, and legally grounded in Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) in 1966. A central tension in the FAO as to whether hunger was “best addressed as an item on an economic development agenda that emphasized the improvement of living conditions” was resolved by Sen’s insistence that food was indeed a development issue, for FAO orchestration (Fakhri, 2019, p. 8–9).

The public vision, however, was at odds with US reconstruction of world order, which privileged agro-technologies as the catalyst of agricultural modernization in Europe *via* the Marshall Plan, and in the non-Western world. Accordingly, the US overrode the proposal by the FAO and the UN Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) to establish a World Food Board, preferring to develop its own network of bilateral food aid programs. Meanwhile, dispersal of Green Revolution technology across Third World states from the 1960’s undermined the FAO’s role in agricultural research (ETC Group, 2009, p. 4), and served as a counterpoint to food aid programming.

Fragmenting Food Governance: The 1974 Conference and Formation of the CFS

Agricultural commodity prices remained relatively stable until the early 1970’s, in part due to US food aid (Tubiana, 1989). US détente with the Soviet Union in 1972–73, however, emptied surplus grain stocks for the first time in the post-war period, tripling grain and oilseed prices and contributing to a global food crisis. Famine stalked Bangladesh, India, Ethiopia, and the Sahel region. In response, the Non-Aligned Countries called for an emergency joint conference between the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and the FAO.

The World Food Conference of 1974 in Rome was an intergovernmental conference, with social movements and NGOs attending a parallel conference (Shaw, 2007). At the Conference, the UN linked food production and distribution to

⁴Available online at: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/12/why-we-need-the-davos-manifesto-for-better-kind-of-capitalism/> (accessed March 5, 2021).

an explicitly “humanitarian” goal of food aid *via* grants. FAO Director-General Addeke Boerma claimed: “Food is not like any other commodity. If human beings have a right to life at all, they have a right to food” (quoted in Jarosz, 2009, p. 50). This claim institutionalized the FAO’s original public vision of food security as a human right (Fakhri, 2019, p. 15). Meanwhile US aid programming encouraged recipient countries to adopt Green Revolution technologies to increase domestic food production in lieu of aid (Clapp and Moseley, 2020, p. 3).

The Conference was held under the auspices of the United Nations, rather than the FAO, whose mandates were politically contested. The FAO was viewed by OECD states as incapable of managing the crisis, given geo-political tensions associated with food and oil crises, and contention around Third World demands for a New International Economic Order (NIEO).

Boerma’s successor, Director-General Edouard Saouma pledged to decentralize and reform the FAO. The UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS) formed in this vortex, as an intergovernmental body to promote policy convergence to develop a global strategic framework for food security and nutrition. Meanwhile, the FAO was weakened by the creation of an alternative funding agency, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), delinking of the World Food Program (WFP) from the FAO, and relocation of agricultural research to the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) in the World Bank. During this period, the US sought once again to undermine public food governance through the fragmentation of the FAO’s authority and establishment of an alternative governing body, the ineffective World Food Council, which folded in 1993 (ETC Group, 2009, p. 4).

Neoliberal Transformations: Free Trade Agreements and the 1996 Summit

The original FAO vision of public global food governance was further weakened by 1986, with the World Bank redefining food security as “the ability to purchase food” (Jarosz, 2009, p. 51). In the same year the Uruguay Round began, the US Secretary of Agriculture challenged the GATT’s Article XI food security provisions (1947) alluding to agribusinesses “comparative advantage.” In 1989, the USDA further reinforced this position, noting, “The U.S. has always maintained that self-sufficiency and food security are not one and the same. Food security—the ability to acquire the food you need when you need it—is best provided through a smooth-functioning world market” (quoted in Ritchie, 1993, fn. 35).

The Uruguay Round, managed by corporate lawyers and multinational agribusinesses, offered market openings to products from the Global South and the free-trader Cairns Group. In this context, 123 states signed on to the WTO in 1994 and its institutionalization in 1995 of a “free trade” regime deemed necessary for global “food security” *via* its Agreement on Agriculture protocol. This vision of a world food market informed the 1996 UN World Food Summit, organized by the FAO’s new Director-General, Jacques Diouf. Here, 185 states committed to reduce world hunger by half by 2015 with the Rome Declaration on World Food Security and a Plan of Action.

However, the Plan of Action was unable to reconcile the various institutional food-system-related initiatives inherited from decentralization of FAO governance in the mid-1970’s with the market-oriented vision of food security prioritizing global trade, as instituted *via* the WTO. The trade regime deepened an agrarian crisis in the global South among small-scale farmers, who had lost price supports and food subsidies *via* Structural Adjustment loan conditions. Meanwhile large-scale grain farmers in the US and Europe retained huge subsidies, enabling cheap food dumping in Southern markets (McMichael, 2013a). In addition, WTO liberalization measures promoted export agriculture globally, at the expense of local food crop producers—as underscored in the CFS 1998 report, where Southern states observed that the trade regime was compromising their food security (Jarosz, 2009, p. 53). In the second half of the 1990’s up to 30 million peasants were dispossessed, according to a conservative report by the FAO (Madeley, 2000, p. 75).

The Food Sovereignty Countermovement: Agrarian Crisis and CFS Reform

At a parallel summit to the World Food Summit in Rome in 1996, international NGOs together with newly formed transnational social movements denounced “food dumping” and called for “food sovereignty,” a concept first developed by La Vía Campesina (LVC), the international peasant coalition. Through the claim of food sovereignty, LVC articulated a vision of democratic, territorially controlled food systems not subject to market-control of the global North and its transnational food corporations.

In 2000, La Vía Campesina joined 51 other civil society organizations to form the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty (IPC), a platform dedicated to strengthening social movements’ voices, and encouraged the FAO to convene a multilateral forum to address issues of food security. This vision came to pass following the “food crisis” of 2007–08 and a series of cascading food riots in 30 countries, from Haiti to Italy (Patel and McMichael, 2009). At the time, northern government mandates promoting biofuels as a “green” fuel were displacing food crops across the world, attracting “land grab” financial ventures and deepening food insecurity (Houtart, 2010). Such a serious legitimacy crisis for the UN spurred Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to establish a High-Level Task Force on the Global Food Crisis including the FAO, the World Bank and the World Trade Organization. This particular composition reflected the coalescing of a market-based vision of food governance shared among these three international institutions, holding the line against the food sovereignty movement.

“Food crisis” agitation also prompted reform of the CFS in 2009. While the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) was originally established as a technical intergovernmental body of the FAO, in the crisis context the CFS was reformed to enhance its capacity to govern global food security. In seeking to create greater inclusivity and evidence-based decision-making, Member States established the Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples’ Mechanism (CSM) and a Private Sector Mechanism (PSM), both self-organized. The CSM privileges agrarian social movements

and small-scale producers by design, not only because they are so important in nourishing their communities, but also because they bear the burden of hunger and malnutrition. Seventy percent of those who suffer from the most acute forms of hunger are small-scale producers and rural workers (UNCTAD, 2013). Moreover, recent years have seen increasingly criminalization of and violence against social movements fighting for land and water (Hoddy, 2021). While Member States remain the primary voting members of the CFS, the CSM and PSM were invited to participate in setting the agenda and negotiating policy recommendations within the CFS (Duncan, 2015; McKeon, 2015). The 2009 reform of CFS also established a High-Level Panel of Experts as a science-policy interface to provide scientific evidence on issues affecting food security and nutrition, as mandated by the Member States (Gitz and Meybeck, 2011). As a result of the reform, the CFS has asserted itself and its governing model as the “foremost inclusive international and intergovernmental platform for all stakeholders to work together to ensure food security and nutrition for all”⁵. In the years since the reform, the CFS has developed several significant policy instruments including the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security (VGGT) and a wide variety of policy recommendations on food security, from the role of biofuels to connecting smallholders to markets. It has also set up monitoring mechanisms for these policy instruments to hold Member States accountable to rights-holders.

Public Food Governance Endangered: The 2008 FAO Conference

Given its mandate rooted in the human right to food, its one-country-one-vote system of governance, and its inclusion of those most affected by food and nutrition security, the CFS is a legitimate arena of public global food governance. However, the CFS faces competing spaces, institutions, and models of governance that have mushroomed in the post-food crisis period.

In June 2008, the FAO High Level Conference on World Food Security confirmed and intensified the WTO’s market-based governance of food and nutrition security. The African continent became a key target for neoliberal experimentation. FAO Director-General Jacques Diouf advocated bringing “African agriculture into line with changing conditions worldwide” to prevent “its agricultural trade deficit to deteriorate any further” in the event that food surplus nations reduced exports, further inflating food prices (Diouf and Severino, 2008, p. 16). As the food crisis unfolded, World Bank President Robert Zoellick announced a 50% increase in financial support for global agriculture, amounting to \$6 billion, in addition to providing “seeds and fertilizer for the planting season, especially for smallholders in poor countries” (GRAIN, 2008). This reflected the Bank’s new agenda, where agriculture would be reorganized by the private sector *via* value-chains to “bring the market to smallholders and commercial farms” (World Bank, 2007, p. 8).

The International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty, in its *Terra Preta* parallel meeting, responded by resisting this attack on public global food governance.

The serious and urgent food and climate crises are being used by political and economic elites as opportunities to entrench corporate control of world agriculture and the ecological commons. At a time when chronic hunger, dispossession of food providers and workers, commodity and land speculation, and global warming are on the rise, governments, multilateral agencies and financial institutions are offering proposals that will only deepen these crises through more dangerous versions of policies that originally triggered the current situation⁶.

That is, the proposed solution to these crises was not to restore the health and viability of small-scale farming systems across the world with public subsidies and institutional supports. Rather, the Conference’s decision to promote corporate value-chain farming in Africa reinforced the World Bank’s role as the premier development institution, brokering financial investment and defining the food crisis as a productivity issue, requiring large-scale agricultural investments and/or incorporation of farmers into supply chains. While value-chains have been promoted by the World Bank to improve smallholder productivity, they ultimately serve to embed many farmers in relations of dependency on agro-inputs, and expands food exports at the expense of local food security (McMichael, 2013b).

A number of different value-chain driven initiatives were established subsequently, promoting public-private partnerships and multistakeholder initiatives as the primary form of governance. Among these, the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) has had the highest profile. Founded by the Rockefeller and Gates Foundations in 2006, AGRA has leveraged private and public funding to promote an array of public-private partnerships (PPP). AGRA set up an infrastructure of 10,000 agro-dealers folding small-scale farmers into value-chains comprising agro-inputs (seeds, fertilizer, and pesticides) and contracts for delivery of produce to corporate processors and retailers. Partnering with the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), it provided “technologies, infrastructure and financing” to Africa’s farmers, unrepresented in a governance structure dominated by large investors and biotechnology representatives (ActionAid, 2009). So, while the 2008 food crisis and UN summit triggered internal reform leading to the introduction of civil society into the CFS, governing powers expanded an industrial farming model to serve global markets at the expense of small-scale farming systems and farmers’ rights to produce food primarily for territorial and local markets. La Vía Campesina aptly called this model “agriculture without farmers,” given its goal of replacing local farming knowledges and territorial markets with proprietary technologies and global value chains. AGRA, as elaborated below, served as a model for the UN’s capitulation to the WEF.

⁵ Available online at: <http://www.fao.org/cfs> (accessed January 26, 2020).

⁶ Available online at: <https://viacampesina.org/en/civil-society-declaration-of-the-terra-pret-a-forum/> (accessed January 29, 2020).

Contention With Market-Based Food Governance

Growing global concern about the contributions of industrial agriculture on to climate change and the consequences of climate change for food production led to further struggles between institutions to capture the narrative of sustainability. In 2002, the World Bank initiated the International Agricultural Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology (IAASTD). In 2009, the IAASTD culminated in internationally negotiated summaries and publications, concluding that “business as usual is not an option.” The reports demonstrated that the failure of markets to adequately value environmental and social harm and provide incentives for sustainability necessitated deep changes to achieve more sustainable outcomes. Private sector participants walked away from the IAASTD when it became clear that they could not dictate the narratives about benefits of pesticides and genetically modified organisms; and a few powerful governments (the US, UK, and Australia) attempted to bury the reports by filing objections at the final plenary. For its part, the World Bank published the *World Development Report* (WDR) at the same time as the IAASTD⁷. Their messages could hardly have been more different. Whereas, the WDR recommended economic integration and continued emphasis on agro-industrial economic growth in certain areas with comparative advantage, the IAASTD pointed toward food sovereignty and illuminated structural disadvantages that impeded economic integration. In the years since, the IAASTD has proven increasingly influential and its conclusions have been supported by numerous subsequent reports⁸. After years of propounding the narrative of the necessity of proprietary technologies to feed the world, it has become clear that the industrial food system has not only left communities more vulnerable to climate change as a result of decreased biodiversity and degraded soil health, but also that it is primarily small-scale producers who feed their communities (International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems, 2017)⁹.

Multinational corporations, agro-exporting states, and the Gates Foundation have therefore sought to recapture control of governance through the framework of “climate-smart agriculture” (CSA). First articulated by the FAO in 2009, CSA has been conceptualized as an approach to agricultural development and governance within a “market liberal frame” that emphasizes “pricing, market-making, technology and protecting private property rights in order to meet the twin challenges of climate change and food insecurity” (Newell and Taylor, 2018, p. 113). In turn, opposition to this agenda by La Via Campesina and the CSM have also led the FAO and CFS to increasingly recognize the concept of agroecology. In 2014 and 2018, the FAO organized two International Symposia on agroecology. In the CFS, the High-Level Panel of Experts

published a report on *Agroecological and Other Innovations For Sustainable Food Systems* (2019), promoting agroecology as a transformational pathway for sustainable food systems. This interest in agroecology stems not only from advocacy by civil society, but also the widening global consensus of the failures of the industrial food system.

This institutional support for agroecology, however limited, has spurred backlash from states and multinational corporations that continue to promote agro-industrial production practices. Donald Trump’s Ambassador to the Rome-Based Agencies of the United Nations, Kip Tom, attacked the institutions that have supported agroecology in early 2020, lambasting the FAO for deviating from the narrative of the Green Revolution and claiming that agroecology is ideological and unscientific¹⁰. CropLife International—the global trade organization that represents the interests of the largest global agro-chemical corporations including the “big four” corporations that control over 60% of global commercial seed sales (Mooney, 2018)—has sought to reinterpret agroecology as simply one technique, or “one tool in the agricultural toolbox” (Giraldo and Rosset, 2018). Employing a myriad of strategies, the governing powers of food and agriculture have again sought to undermine the public vision of food once promoted by the FAO.

THE FORMATION AND STRUCTURE OF THE UN FOOD SYSTEMS SUMMIT

UN Secretary-General António Guterres’s announcement of the UN Food System Summit may be easier to interpret in light of the history of past world food summits and the struggles described above, in which powerful states have continuously undermined the public vision of global food governance to maintain control. Guterres described the aim of the summit as “maximizing the co-benefits of a food systems approach across the entire 2030 Agenda and meet[ing] the challenges of climate change”¹¹. Announced before the COVID-19 pandemic, the Summit was planned to take place in 2021. While it is not yet clear what form the Summit will now take, the Summit is currently in its preparatory stages of information gathering.

Initially, participants of the CSM initially welcomed the announcement of the Summit, which promised to elevate the political significance of food systems; but they were cautious about who was organizing the Summit and why. The IPC, La Via Campesina, and NGOs have sought to protect and promote the CFS, given its inclusive and evidence-based approach to food security their influence in the CFS has grown. They worry that the Summit is aimed at undermining the authority of the CFS, motivated by WEF’s effort to capture the narrative of food system transformation, as the HLPE report on agroecology had given

⁷ Available online at: <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/5991> (accessed January 17, 2021).

⁸ Available online at: <https://www.globalagriculture.org/transformation-of-our-food-systems.html> (accessed January 29, 2020).

⁹ “80% of the world’s food reaches those who consume it not through formal value chains and retail networks, but through territorially-rooted markets” (McKeon, 2018, p. 2).

¹⁰ Agricultural Outlook Speech 6 February 2020. See also, https://www.realcworld.com/articles/2020/08/05/the_un_should_learn_that_ideology_wont_stop_a_plague_of_locusts_501134.html (accessed January 29, 2020).

¹¹ Available online at: <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/personnel-appointments/2019-12-16/ms-agnes-kalibata-of-rwanda-special-envoy-for-2021-food-systems-summit> (accessed January 29, 2020).

such a positive prognosis of agroecology as key to transformation (HLPE, 2019).

The designation of the Summit as a *food systems* summit is significant. The concept of food systems was developed as a holistic, systems-based approach to account for all the ecological and social activities through which food is produced, distributed, and consumed (Kneen, 1989; Ericksen et al., 2010). Members of the CSM promote the concept of food systems to emphasize the multifunctional role of agriculture and its environmental and social impacts. As the language of “sustainable food systems” has grown more widespread, however, it has been watered down. Components of food systems are often bracketed by different actors in pursuit of their interests and the concept of sustainability is mobilized vaguely and inconsistently (Foran et al., 2014; Béné et al., 2019). As Oliver De Schutter and Olivia Yambi wrote with regard to the UNFSS, the focus on food systems is welcome; but “talking about food systems is not enough. *How* we talk about them and *with whom* is what matters most”¹².

In analyzing the formation and structure of the Summit, we identify three dimensions of the Summit’s current processes that raise significant concerns about the UNFSS’s fidelity to its own commitments to transparency, accountability, and human rights. These are: its structure and recruitment of leaders and participants, its multistakeholder approach to inclusivity and normative basis, and its failure to address conflicts of interest and corporate influence.

Structure of the Summit and Recruitment of Participants

The initial step in planning the Summit, the appointment of a Special Envoy to lead the Summit, offered the first indication of how the Summit would proceed. Without consulting the CFS or civil society, Guterres appointed Dr. Agnes Kalibata, the President of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) as Special Envoy, allowing opportunities to repackage and promote the narrative of the Green Revolution. While the original Green Revolution is now understood to have fostered rural inequality, environmental degradation, farmer sickness and suicide, the “new” Green Revolution claims greater concern with small-scale food producers and sustainability (Holt-Giménez and Altieri, 2013; Patel, 2013). With support from agribusiness corporations, the WEF, global philanthropies, and development agencies of several governments in the Global North, AGRA has emerged at the front line of efforts to impose the agro-industrial model onto postcolonial rural populations that have resisted incorporation into global markets. Despite two different letters with support from over 500 organizations demanding a termination of the UN/WEF agreement and the appointment of the President of AGRA as Special Envoy¹³, the UN Secretary-General failed to respond. The letter of March 2020 explained that

civil society concerns were rooted in the expansion of corporate influence on food systems and AGRA’s approach to agricultural investment. This roll-out of the Summit seemed to capitulate to the United States’ critiques of FAO for promoting agroecology.

The Summit launch and its subsequent development have been non-transparent and chaotic, even according to its supporters. This has been apparent in the selection and recruitment of participants and leaders of different components of the Summit and its confusing structure, with a proliferating expansion of tracks, sub-tracks and committees. The degree of confusion generated by the well-seasoned bureaucrats who seem to be in charge has led some people to speculate that the convoluted structure of the Summit is intentional to allow takeover by corporate participants, or at least frustrate social movements’ attempts to stop this.

What was perhaps most surprising about the Summit is its elaborate structure, which replicates already existing bodies in the CFS and reconstitutes them as experts and advisors hand-picked by the Special Envoy. The UNFSS is composed of several political and scientific advisory bodies, or “support structures,” which include an Advisory Committee, Scientific Group, UN Task Force and an “Integrative Team” (the existence and composition of which does not appear on the website). In addition to these councils, there is a “Champions Network,” divided into “Food Systems Heroes” and “Food System Champions.” While anyone can apply to be a Hero, the Champions include “network and institutional leaders from across the food system who commit to mobilizing their networks, sharing information, and taking action to support the Summit”¹⁴.

The substance of the UNFSS was split into five Action Tracks according to a July 27 press release¹⁵ (although the website link leads to an unrelated announcement about the Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change). The Action Tracks are:

- (1) Ensure access to safe and nutritious food;
- (2) Shift to sustainable consumption patterns;
- (3) Boost nature-positive production;
- (4) Advance equitable livelihoods; and
- (5) Build resilience to vulnerabilities, shocks and stress¹⁶.

Nearly 2 months after announcing the Tracks, the Special Envoy appointed leaders for each one. Each Action Track is led by a Chair, one or two Vice Chairs, and an anchoring UN agency. On top of this structure, Action Tracks have three levels of leadership: a “core team,” a “leadership team,” and open platforms¹⁷. Each Action Track is charged with carrying out multistakeholder dialogues and from these to “develop exemplary game-changing

¹² Available online at: <https://foodtank.com/news/2020/03/2021-food-systems-summit-started-on-wrong-foot-it-could-still-be-transformational/> (accessed March 5, 2021).

¹³ Available online at: http://www.csm4cfs.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/EN_CS0-Letter-to-UNSG-on-UN-food-systems-summit.pdf (accessed March 5, 2021).

¹⁴ Available online at: <https://www.un.org/en/food-systems-summit/champions-network> (accessed January 29, 2021).

¹⁵ Available online at: <https://www.un.org/en/food-systems-summit/pressroom> (accessed January 29, 2021).

¹⁶ Available online at: <https://www.un.org/en/food-systems-summit/action-tracks> (accessed January 17, 2021).

¹⁷ Available online at: <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2020/09/leading-experts-chosen-to-drive-five-priority-areas-for-un-food-systems-summit/> (accessed February 28, 2021).

and systemic solutions” and a review of their key reflections¹⁸. Starter Discussion Papers were prepared for each Action Track and posted on the Summit’s website (sometimes with a revision). Each Action Track also contains a public forum on the Summit’s website with announcements of upcoming events, but the leadership within each track other than the Chair, Vice-Chair(s), and supporting UN agency is not publicly available.

How leaders were recruited and how the Action Tracks were developed has raised several concerns. Decision-making processes are quite non-transparent in the UNFSS and crucial information is not publicly available. For example, how “experts” in the Scientific Group were selected is not clear, in sharp contrast to the public invitations and protocols set up for the High-Level Panel of Experts (HLPE) of the CFS. There is almost no overlap with the membership of the HLPE. Some key expertise seems to be missing from the Scientific Group, such as agroecology and global food governance. Perhaps because of this lack of expertise, there are discontinuities with previous interpretations of key concepts. For example, the Scientific Group published a background paper on the concept of food systems, which brackets health, ecological, and energy systems as “neighboring systems” (Braun et al., 2020). This represents a clear divergence from agroecological frameworks, which include all of these components as part of the food system. The definition of food systems for the UNFSS reinforces a problem created by the confusing layers of Action Tracks, Dialogues, Public Forums, and options for participation. Additionally, the budget for the Summit has not been made public. As of August 2020, the Summit was estimated to cost over \$20 million. It is neither public where funding is coming from nor how money is being spent. Without this basic transparency, it is unclear how donations are being leveraged to influence the Summit.

Invitations have been extended to individuals and organizations to participate as “leaders” in various ways, but often the invitations have purposefully by-passed established ways that civil society and other institutions self-organize. For example, an initial invitation to lead the Action Track on “nature-positive solutions” was made to a member of the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems (IPES-Food), without any terms of reference yet demanding a response within just a few hours. The person who was invited responded that she would need time to consult with the Panel and its Secretariat, and eventually decided that she couldn’t accept the invitation. But why weren’t the co-Coordiators of IPES-Food consulted originally and why were the organizers making an invitation without clarifying what work was involved or why that person’s participation was vital? (One of the co-Coordiators has agreed subsequently to co-lead a sub-topic of this Action Track.) Although the CSM has chosen not to participate in the Summit, many civil society organizations (including some that also are part of CSM) are engaging in various Action Tracks. In fact, representatives from non-governmental organizations are Chairs or Vice-Chairs of most of the Action Tracks. Civil society, like the private sector, is diverse; many organizations have decided

that the opportunities opened to them by participating in the Summit exceed any risks.

Just as the invitations bypassed established fora and mechanisms for civil society engagement, the UNFSS’ framing disregards much of the previous international work on food system framing and pathways to solutions. The Action Tracks, while being worthwhile goals in themselves, ignore previous international agreements that are vital to finding more systemic solutions. Last year, the HLPE published “Food Security and Nutrition: Building a Global Narrative Toward 2030” that laid out a roadmap with potential policy directions for transforming food systems (HLPE, 2020). In addition, numerous UN institutions have developed frameworks to guide global food governance through a rights-based framework, including the Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas, which was passed by the General Assembly in 2018, as well as General Recommendation 34, issued by the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women in 2014, which elaborates the rights of rural women. These rights-based approaches are conspicuously absent in many of the UNFSS’ documents. The right to food and nutrition is mentioned briefly in the first Action Track’s accompanying Discussion Starter Paper as “civil society campaigns”¹⁹ but not as its primary objective or framework. Agroecology is hardly visible in the description of the Action Track on “nature-positive production” nor in its revised Discussion Starter Paper²⁰, despite the significant work on it by FAO and the High Level Panel of Experts of CFS. In the Discussion Paper, agroecology is mentioned as an example of “efficiency” in production; but for the HLPE as well as peoples’ movements and civil society organizations that are struggling for food sovereignty, its benefits extend far beyond making production more efficient (and “efficiency” as a goal is routinely associated with industrial food systems) (HLPE, 2019).

The UNFSS’ evasion of existing institutions and frameworks has led the CSM to conclude that the UNFSS is designed to undermine the position of the CFS as the primary seat of global food governance, which the CSM has fought hard to protect since the 2009 reform. Over the past few years, several powerful governments have sought to actively weaken the CFS by slowing down policy-making processes and reducing the CFS’s program of work, then criticizing it for moving at a slow pace. More recently, these governments refused to use recent CFS meetings to substantively address the COVID-19 pandemic in anticipation of the UNFSS. Yet the UNFSS is not showing any signs of being able to overcome the underlying barriers to an effective CFS; if anything, it will exacerbate them (see below section on Conflicts of Interest). Many people believe that the CFS should have been the organizing body for the UNFSS; but not only has it been bypassed, but its leadership was neglected in the rather insulting original inclusion of Thanawat Tiensin, the CFS Chair, as one of over 100 self-appointed “champions” of the UNFSS. Organizers

¹⁸2021 Food Systems Summit Briefing to Member States. 4 September 2020 [On file with authors].

¹⁹Available online at: https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/unfss-at1-discussion_starter-dec2020.pdf, p. 10 (accessed January 17, 2021).

²⁰Available online at: https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/unfss-at3-discussion_starter-dec2020.pdf (accessed January 17, 2021).

of the UNFSS invited him to join the Advisory Committee only after the CSM publicly raised concerns about the Summit. Both the CFS and FAO are well-placed to respond to the pandemic and organize a conference on “food systems,” but the FAO has no more prominence than any other UN agency. The UN Task Force of the UNFSS is chaired by the Executive Director of the UN Environment Programme Inger Andersen.

Taken altogether, the structure of the UNFSS and its recruitment of leadership has failed to meet basic standards of accountability and transparency that even the organizers claim to espouse. Instead, leaders, experts, and participants have been cherry-picked from organizations that are either unaware of already existing institutions, amenable to the reframing of food systems through the Green Revolution framework, or ignorant of the history and dangers of multistakeholder partnerships undermining multilateral governance. Perhaps most problematically, many of those selected as leaders are unaccountable to constituencies that are at the front lines of food systems.

Inclusivity and the Multistakeholder Model of the Summit

The possibility for “meaningful participation” by those most affected by food insecurity has been rendered hollow by the UNFSS’s diffuse and opaque design. The UNFSS exhibits a puzzling combination of top-down closed decision-making (e.g., in formation of the Scientific Group, Advisory Committee and Integrative Team) and simply opening the door to anyone who wants to participate (e.g., in formation of the “Champions” group). The Special Envoy has described the UNFSS as a “People’s Summit,” but there is no recognition of the need to center voices of front-line food system actors whose rights have been consistently violated and who are not being well-served by food systems. Without prioritizing those constituencies, as required by human rights-based approaches, the most powerful and well-resourced participants will inevitably dominate.

The ambiguity of participation and lack of accountability is most clearly exemplified by UNFSS “dialogues.” The dialogues are the main form of popular participation in the Summit. They are being convened as “an opportunity for everyone to engage with the Summit in a meaningful way”²¹. According to the website, dialogues can be initiated by governments (“member state dialogues”), the Special Envoy (“global dialogues”), or anyone at all (“independent dialogues”). Despite the elaborate design of the dialogues (including a 44-page “reference manual” on the Summit’s website about how to facilitate them), there is no indication on the website about how the vast amount of input they will generate will be filtered and compiled nor how it will influence activities of the Summit or its outcomes. In addition, all dialogues are “invitation only;” the first one in the United States did not invite members of CSM-North America who have been working on food systems through this

official sub-regional constituency of the CSM for over a decade²². Whether or not these “dialogues” are designed to diffuse efforts by people’s movements to influence the outcome of the Summit, they create a significant opportunity to co-opt the participation of peoples’ movements by failing to provide accountability to assure their inputs are incorporated into final outcomes.

The UNFSS website also acts as a sort of dialogue. The website describes itself as a “community platform to encourage public, global conversations as part of a year-long global dialogue leading up to the milestone event to transform food systems worldwide.” The website has the feel of a social media platform, including discussion boards, feeds, and an overwhelming number of documents. Photos and short videos are embedded, with captions such as “We Are All Connected.” On the website, people are encouraged to participate in the following ways:

1. Sign up to join discussions across all communities.
2. Join a community, respond to ongoing discussions, or start one.
3. Connect with members, and grow your network and community.
4. Share links, videos, photos, and tell your story in any of the communities.

It is unclear how any of the elaborate forms of participation—from the online discussion boards to the virtual dialogues to the other UNFSS events—contribute to the outcomes of the Summit. For example, the “Events” tab includes such wildly disparate fora as the Davos Forum of the WEF and the Oxford Real Farming Conference (the “unofficial gathering of the agroecological farming movement in the UK, including organic and regenerative farming, bringing together practicing farmers and growers with scientists and economists, activists and policy-makers”²³.) That is, the website seems to be absorbing any and all events that touch on food systems governance and portraying them as part of the UNFSS.

These problems stem from the fact that inclusivity in the UNFSS is primarily interpreted through the paradigm of multistakeholderism, a form of governance that has been imported from the corporate sector into the public domain (Pigman, 2007). Multistakeholderism seeks to incorporate all those affected by a given issue into policy-making processes on an imaginary level playing field. The WEF is actively seeking to redesign multilateral global governance through the model of multistakeholderism as part of the “the Great Reset.” The Great Reset is an attempt by the WEF to reassert control over global policymaking in a moment when popular movements (on both the right and the left) are mobilizing to oppose the economic inequalities that have proliferated as a consequence of decades of neoliberalism. As a paper posted on the WEF website notes,

The lack of faith in the “system” has meant that the notion of “taking back control”—including from multilateral organizations—has gained currency in recent years among

²¹ Available online at: <https://www.un.org/en/food-systems-summit/food-systems-dialogues> (accessed January 29, 2020).

²² Available online at: <https://nffc.net/2021-un-food-system-summit-dialogues-rekindle-concerns/> (accessed January 29, 2020).

²³ Available online at: <https://orfc.org.uk/about/> (accessed January 29, 2020).

citizens and leaders alike. The danger in this development is that skepticism over the value of geostrategic institutions, and even of multilateralism itself, risks eroding the global community's ability to properly manage the primary economic, environmental and technological risks facing the world today²⁴.

For the WEF, multistakeholderism is a strategic approach to maintaining liberal trade agreements and open markets, while reducing risks from environmental degradation and popular resistance. The promotion of multistakeholder platforms is part of a broader vision of stakeholder capitalism that seeks to embed corporations within systems of governance without compromising regulatory control (Schwab, 2021).

Since inequalities of power are not accounted for in these processes, multistakeholderism has been critiqued as a mode of governance that serves to reproduce existing power structures under the guise of inclusivity. A recent report by the CFS High Level Panel of Experts warns that addressing power differentials is critical for the success of any multistakeholder platform. In their report, the HLPE clearly states that,

There is a risk for MSPs to reproduce existing *power asymmetries* and to strengthen the position of more powerful actors. One of the challenges for MSPs in the field of FSN [food security and nutrition] is to acknowledge and address these power asymmetries. Inclusiveness, transparency and accountability are keys to address this challenge. Full and effective participation of the most marginalized and vulnerable groups, directly affected by food insecurity and malnutrition, will be ensured if weaker partners have the right and capacity to speak, to be heard and influence the decisions. This requires time and resources to participate in discussion, including in physical meetings, as well as information, expertise, and communication skills (HLPE, 2018, p. 16).

Multistakeholder platforms undermine the clear responsibilities of governments and replace political participation with a model that lacks clear rules of participation, subverts traditional means of political representation and erases mechanisms of accountability.

The consistent failure of multistakeholder platforms to address asymmetries in the context of food and agricultural initiatives has led many scholars to be skeptical of their ability to do more than promote the interests of the powerful (Muller, 2011; Cheyns and Riisgaard, 2014; McKeon, 2017; Gleckman, 2018). The Institute for Multi-stakeholder Initiative Integrity recently published a report from its 10 years of research that decisively finds that multistakeholder initiatives “are not effective tools for holding corporations accountable for abuses, protecting rights holders against human rights violations, or providing survivors and victims’ with access to remedy” (MSI Integrity, 2020, p. 4). Similarly, the HLPE notes that there is little evidence of the effectiveness of multistakeholder processes.

Scientists and other actors question the potential benefits and limitations, the performance and even the relevance of MSPs as a suitable institutional mechanism to finance and improve FSN. They also question the conditions for MSPs to contribute effectively to the realization of the right to adequate food (HLPE, 2018, p. 13).

Research on multistakeholderism has shown again and again not only that multistakeholder initiatives are ineffective, but also that when there is not an agreed-upon frame, initiatives are bound to fail (Fung and Wright, 2003; Gray, 2004). This is certainly the case for the UNFSS: exactly what is the problem that the Summit is designed to fix, and how will it help?

The adoption of a multistakeholder approach raises questions about the normative basis of the Summit. As described earlier, previous Summits have been organized through the multilateral institutions of the United Nations. Member States have been the primary participants of these meetings, with civil society participating in “parallel summits.” This reflects the normative framework of public international law through which the UN operates. In this framework, states are the primary actors and duty-bearers for human rights obligations. With the embrace of multistakeholderism in the UNFSS, it is an open question whether human rights remain the primary normative framework. These concerns have been raised repeatedly by the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Michael Fakhri, to Dr. Kalibata²⁵. As he noted in a recent analysis of the review on Action Tracks, only Action Track four emphasizes the right to food as a core framework, and three of the action tracks do not mention the right to food at all²⁶. Moreover, the rights-based institutions of the United Nations, such as the CFS, the International Labor Organization, and the Geneva-based human rights bodies are not well-represented in the Summit's Leadership. This may help to explain why food system actors, who suffer from consistent rights violations, including foodworkers, farmworkers, peasants, and Indigenous peoples, are very poorly represented in the UNFSS.

Grounding the Summit in human rights is critical because it is a framework for ensuring meaningful participation of those most marginalized and vulnerable. The 2004 Voluntary Guidelines to support the Progressive Realization of the Right to Adequate Food in the Context of National Food Security describe several procedural principles to guide policy-making processes that address food and nutrition security. Commonly known as the PANTHER framework, these include participation, accountability, non-discrimination, transparency, human dignity, empowerment and the rule of law²⁷. This rights-based approach emphasizes that those most affected by food insecurity should not only be able to participate meaningfully, but that governments must be accountable for these rights. This has important implications for the outcome of the Summit. While

²⁴Available online at: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/07/multistakeholder-risk-resiliency-climate-change-trade/> (accessed January 29, 2020).

²⁵Letter from the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food to Dr. Agnes Kalibata. 26 June 2020. On file with authors.

²⁶Letter from the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food to Dr. Agnes Kalibata. 13 January 2021. On file with authors.

²⁷See: FAO. 2009. “Conducting A Right to Food Assessment.” <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i0550e.pdf> (accessed January 13, 2021).

the Summit aims to generate a voluntary non-negotiated political document with guidelines for stakeholders to promote food system transformation, as Special Rapporteur Michael Fakhri notes: “without relying on human rights... this document will remain aspirational and not practical.”

Conflicts of Interest and Corporate Influence in the UNFSS

In addition to the multistakeholder design of the UNFSS, the Summit's failure to safeguard against conflicts of interest risks further enabling corporate influence in the Summit. By conflicts of interest, we mean financial and non-financial interests or commitments either through fiduciary obligations or duties of loyalty that risk impairing non-partial judgment and decision-making. Conflicts of interests “distort decision-making processes and generate inappropriate outcomes, and thereby undermine the well-functioning of both public institutions and markets” (Peters, 2012, p. 3). A corporation that is obliged to maximize profits for its shareholders or which depends for its existence on increasing sales of agrifood system inputs or products has a conflict of interest in the UNFSS because private financial interest should never be allowed to usurp the public interest in food security and nutrition. Such conflicts must be disclosed routinely in scientific or medical research and publications, and they should be equally obligatory in work on food systems. In part, a key problem is that multistakeholder initiatives are designed to promote diverse interests and inclusivity, rather than manage the risks of conflicts of interests. However, failing to guard against the dominance of commercial interests risks undermining the UN's own values of independence, impartiality, and integrity on which it depends for public legitimacy.

By appointing the current President of AGRA as Special Envoy, the UN not only signaled support for AGRA's market-led, technology-driven approach, it invited the rescaling of a corporate-philanthropic alliance developed on the African continent onto the global scale. AGRA explicitly aims to commercialize and industrialize African food systems through its model of “market-led technology adoption.” This approach incentivizes farmers to adopt Green Revolution technologies, primarily through government-sponsored farm input subsidy programs (Toenniessen et al., 2008). AGRA has provided over \$500 million in grants to encourage the adoption of Green Revolution technologies, primarily hybrid seeds and synthetic fertilizers. Although AGRA promised to “double yields and incomes for 30 million farming households by 2020,” a recent independent evaluation found that not only has AGRA failed to meet its objectives, but there has been a 30% increase in hunger in the countries where AGRA operates (Wise, 2020, 2021). Despite these failures, the Green Revolution continues to be promoted by AGRA's main donor, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Participation of large numbers of people with AGRA connections, and funding through philanthrocapitalists and agribusinesses that belong to the WEF, signal an ongoing revolving door between corporate and public decision-making. WEF's Head of the “Future of Food Initiative,” Sean de Cleene, previously served as the Vice President of AGRA and

Vice President for Global Initiatives, Strategy, and Business Development for Yara—the world's largest fertilizer corporation. However, the WEF partnership is just one of multiple corporate partnerships developed recently by the UN. In October 2019, Guterres also launched the Global Investors for Sustainable Development (GISD), a group of 30 companies that have vowed to provide funding for sustainable development. Even more recently, in 2020 the Director-General of the FAO, Qu Dongyu, raised major concerns when he signed a cooperation agreement with CropLife International. These agreements between multilateral international institutions and organizations that represent the world's largest corporations suggest that philanthropists and multi-national corporations are taking advantage of the global pandemic to institutionalize the “Great Reset.”

AGRA's central role in the UNFSS through the Special Envoy and the UNFSS's staff is also poised to further extend the influence of the Gates Foundation on food system governance. This is worrisome because as the world's largest private foundation [Bill Gates is also the largest owner of US farmland (O'Keefe, 2021)], the Gates Foundation's approach to social change serves to enrich the very same corporations and countries that have been the cause of economic inequalities and environmental degradation (McGoey, 2015; Schwab, 2020). Gates provides extensive global funding to promote private-sector driven technological innovation as the solution to social and environmental problems and promotes policy changes to incentivize this approach through public subsidies and intellectual property protections. He is explicit that companies in the Global North should see global problems as opportunities for profit. In his book on climate change—Gates's newest area of advocacy—he explains,

Rich countries are best suited to develop innovative climate solutions; they're the ones with government funding, research universities, national labs, and start-up companies that draw talent from all over the world, so they'll need to lead the way. Whoever makes big energy breakthroughs and shows they can work on a global scale and be affordable, will find many willing customers in emerging economies (Gates, 2021, p. 35–36).

Gates's projects epitomize conflicts of interest. Yet he is successfully re-organizing global governance across the sectors in which the Foundation works in the image of multistakeholderism. Beyond the UNFSS, the most recent example of this approach is the Gates-backed COVAX facility of the World Health Organization. COVAX was developed to pool resources for equitable vaccine procurement and distribution. Not only is COVAX failing to provide equitable distribution as a result of vaccine nationalism, it has defended patent rights for pharmaceutical corporations in opposition to the world's poorest nations and has been unwelcoming of civil society participation (Amnesty International, 2020; Patnaik, 2020). Similarly, Gates' effort to usurp control of the Consultative Group on International Agriculture Research (CGAIR) has been

decried for institutionalizing control of Northern donors²⁸. Seitz and Martens (2017) describe the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's effort to wrest control from intergovernmental and multilateral institutions through multistakeholder partnerships in which it sits at the helm as "philanthrolateralism."

As a result of its embrace of corporations and philanthrocapitalists the United Nations is facing creeping corporate influence. For over two decades, analysts have warned of "bluwashing"—the use of the UN imagery and brand to strengthen the reputation of multinational corporations in the name of the public good—especially in relationship to the UN Global Compact and the Sustainable Development Goals (Bruno and Karliner, 2002; Utting and Zammit, 2008; Berliner and Prakash, 2015). Seitz and Martens (2017) point to a promotional UNESCO brochure that clearly describes the benefits for multinational corporations in partnering (i.e., contributing financially) with the United Nations. As it explains, donors will:

- Benefit from a strong image transfer by associating yourself with a reputable international brand and a prestigious UN agency
- Win greater visibility on the international scene
- Gain access to UNESCO's wide and diverse public and private networks
- Benefit from UNESCO's role of a neutral and multistakeholder broker
- Turn your Social Responsibility into reality
- Strengthen your brand loyalty through good corporate citizenship (UNESCO, 2015).

As the brochure makes plain, UN agencies were inviting companies to draw on the legitimacy once extended to the UN as a democratic (one-country, one vote) intergovernmental body.

What's new in this example is that UN agencies were also advertising the possibility of directly participating in UN decision-making through multistakeholder initiatives, which as described above raise concerns over corporate control, especially insofar as intergovernmental and UN partnerships with corporations have relaxed control in extending license to private initiatives *via* multistakeholderism. This is exemplified in two significant ventures early in the second decade of the twenty-first century. In 2012, the *New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition* (NAFSN) was formed as a partnership between the G8, the African Union, the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), nine African governments, and over 100 private corporations. This new multistakeholder public-private initiative was to reframe participating governments' land and food policy to promote cross-national "agricultural growth corridors": enclosing land for large-scale industrial agriculture, and incorporating small producers into corporate value chains to produce foodstuffs primarily for export. The initiative aimed to renew development industry initiative and, as the British PM Cameron claimed: to "unleash the power of the private sector" [Paul and Steinbrecher, 2013; Quoted in

Duncan (2015), p. 233]. France has since withdrawn from the project, on grounds that it undermines farming livelihoods of the producers concerned.

The following year, the *UN Global Alliance for Climate Smart Agriculture* (GACSA) formed, with 14 governments and 32 organizations (including food corporations such as Coca-Cola, Dupont, Dow, Monsanto, Walmart, Tyson Foods, and Unilever) to enable 500 million farmers to practice CSA by 2030²⁹. Such ventures followed the model established by the G8, the World Bank, IFAD and the African Development Bank in 2006, which encourage African states to fund public infrastructure to enable the Gates Foundation to deploy its philanthrocapitalism for the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA). This public-private partnership (PPP) model now infuses food governance initiatives underway in the UNFSS, where the WEF represents itself as a global platform for public-private cooperation³⁰, and corporations as serving the public trust. Early in the COVID crisis, in a joint statement, FAO Director-General Qu Donyu notably warned governments to "ensure that any trade-related measures do not disrupt the [global] food supply chain"³¹. This injunction ultimately serves the interests of transnational corporations that control this food supply chain, not local and regional food systems and territorial markets that were much more resilient than global companies in providing healthy food during the pandemic.

Corporations have made no secret of the fact that they see these partnerships with the UN as good for business. As one corporate executive has put it:

The SDGs [Sustainable Development Goals] are a gift to business because the economic rewards for delivering to the needs defined in the SDGs are very significant. According to the Business & Sustainable Development Commission, the potential economic reward from delivering solutions to the SDGs could be worth at least \$12 trillion each year in market opportunities and generate up to 380 million new jobs by 2030 (Pedersen, 2018, p. 23).

These partnerships not only allow corporations to set the agenda, they serve as a "path to value" for corporations that sense they are losing their public legitimacy (Schramade, 2017). By pursuing partnerships and multistakeholder governance, Schwab aims to position "private corporations as the trustees of society"³², which implies overriding and displacing the public interest.

As the paragraphs above make clear, the UNFSS is rife with actual and potential conflicts of interest, which are neither disclosed nor even recognized as problematic. This means that the very corporations that are responsible for promoting food that contributes to unhealthy diets, engaging in practices destructive of producers' livelihoods, violating human rights,

²⁸See IPES-Food's Open Letter dated 21 July 2020: <http://www.ipes-food.org/pages/OneGGIAR> (accessed March 2, 2021).

²⁹Available online at: <http://sdg.iisd.org/news/global-alliance-for-climate-smart-agriculture-launched/> (accessed January 29, 2020).

³⁰Available online at: http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Institutional_Brochure_2016.pdf (accessed January 29, 2020).

³¹Available online at: <https://www.dailysabah.com/world/world-to-face-food-crisis-if-coronavirus-pandemic-not-managed-properly-un-wto/news> (accessed January 29, 2020).

³²Available online at: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/12/why-we-need-the-davos-manifesto-for-better-kind-of-capitalism/> (accessed January 29, 2020).

overpaying CEOs, and creating gross inequity in food systems are playing prominent roles in the UNFSS. Are we to think that they have realized the error of their ways, and are seeking wide input in order to do better? Or perhaps the idea is that significant change in food systems won't result without the participation of the largest food corporations. But participation under what terms? And how will ultimate accountability to rights-holders be assured? Are we seeing foxes being invited into the chicken houses, or genuine interest in transformation?

CONCLUSIONS

Peoples' movements and civil society organizations struggling for food sovereignty fear that the outcomes of the UNFSS are baked into its structure and actions to date. These include (1) capturing the narrative of food systems transformation so that it aligns with the kinds of technologies promoted by AGRA and the WEF; (2) diminishing the role of CFS as the premier forum for discussion and negotiation of issues pertaining to food security; (3) usurping the role of FAO as the UN agency with the primary responsibility for food security; (4) engendering confusion about what "democratic participation" and "inclusivity" mean to equate these with multistakeholderism; (5) excluding the voices of producers and workers on the frontlines and pushing people who are already marginalized even farther from meaningful participation; (6) undermining accountability for violations of human rights and ecohealth degradation; and (7) propping up the illusion that a single global food system based on trade and "economic integration" of smallholders into global markets will ensure sustainable food security, at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic and looming climate emergencies portend the dangers of relying on global supply chains. Each of these outcomes is dangerous for its potential to overturn hard-won achievements of civil society.

Based on our analysis, the Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples Mechanism of the CFS, La Via Campesina, and movements aligned with the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty are well-justified in their concerns about the UNFSS. The criticisms we raised above related to the formation, structure, recruitment, non-transparency, inclusivity, normative basis, and conflicts of interest related to the Summit have led many well-intentioned people to agree to participate, in hopes that they can help to achieve something of value. The amount of time and resources that these people will spend is unfathomable, raising an overriding criticism that the UNFSS is a huge time-sink for questionable purposes. The CFS is in place already. It offers a voice to all stake-holders in food systems through

transparent mechanisms. Although far from perfect, it offers a more accountable framework of rights-based public food security governance, deriving from its historical evolution as the key forum in the UN responsible for public global food governance. At this crisis moment, it needs greater support.

There is no question that food system transformation is urgently needed, and that it is being stymied by certain vested interests that are committed to agro-industrial "false solutions" and their own advancement far more than to the public good. We argue that the time and money spent on the Summit would be better spent on shoring up the CFS; analyzing and addressing conflicts of interest that have derailed some important negotiations there; seeking and strengthening voices and solutions from below such as food sovereignty; and democratizing public institutions and agencies related to food systems, including the SDGs, so that they serve everyone—in short, strengthening the vision of public global food governance that is necessary to end hunger. We could challenge the UNFSS to show that the outcomes feared by civil society will not come to pass. But the lack of response to criticism to date and unwillingness to discuss terms under which civil society might participate with integrity have not been encouraging. The more important challenge is to Member States of the CFS, to show their abiding commitment to human rights and public governance of food systems. If they cannot rise to this challenge, the chances of making real progress in 2021 toward sustainable and equitable food systems seem slim.

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All authors listed have made a substantial, direct and intellectual contribution to the work, and approved it for publication.

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